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ABSTRACT

Cultural activism--such as that promoted by cultural studies pedagogies--is often missing in both the theories and pedagogies of service learning. Ignoring the action potential inherent in cultural studies and its potential contributions to service learning may very well subvert a potentially radical and critical pedagogy into merely a trend. Cultural studies pedagogies compel students to look beyond the written page and recognize the "texts" of the everyday. Cultural studies can provide students with the heuristics necessary to write critically about their individual experiences with community service. To gain what Bruce Herzberg terms "critical consciousness," students need to understand that the services they perform are texts in action; they have historical, economic, social, and cultural positions. If students' civic actions are not viewed as texts to be analyzed, they will merely be required acts of kindness. Cultural studies does not pass itself off as a neutral pedagogy--it is based on Marxism; it requires students to move outside of their comfort zones; and it is primarily concerned with power and politics. And power and politics are at the very core of any community service action. Cultural studies and service learning both suggest the classroom as a forum for investigating the theoretical, practical, and political aspects of the information students encounter. Both pedagogies seek to "produce" students who are civic-minded rhetors. Community service writing seeks to encourage a certain kind of writer: one that can reflect on his/her own experiences; someone who can think, read, and write critically, and someone who has experience doing these things in an environment other than the classroom. To produce such writers, educators must acknowledge their intentions for their students as writers and as citizens. (NKA)

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1

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Ending the Turf Wars: Connecting Service-Learning and Cultural Studies Composition

This past year has afforded me the opportunity to assume two distinct roles that provide various lenses with which to view service learning. On one hand, as a Ph.D. student in a Composition and Rhetoric program, specializing in community service writing, I experience service learning from the vantage point of student, scholar, and instructor. And as an academic, I feel a successful community service writing course reaches the following objectives: real academic learning in the classroom, an understanding of civic engagement, and an attempt at critical and cultural literacy.

A year ago, I accepted a position as the coordinator of a service-learning pilot project that has allowed me to engage service-learning from a non-profit, administrative capacity. Housed at the University, the Center administers five state-wide federal programs that address educational and civic needs of students in Mississippi. The Center's mission is to empower citizens through democratic dialogue and action and improve educational opportunities and achievement by fostering sustained alliances between Mississippi educational institutions and communities. The Mississippi AmeriCorps*VISTA Service-Learning Initiative is one of seven national pilot projects designed to incorporate service learning into this well-established national service program. Applicants who are accepted into this program act as service-learning coordinators for projects at universities, K-12 institutions, and community-based organizations.

As a coordinator for a federally granted program devoted to service learning, I am inundated with interpretations and definitions of service learning that very often conflict with

CS 510 829

those I embrace—and even those I reject—in the world of academe. The fact is that much of the service learning I encounter is character education, and even now I find myself struggling to come to terms with the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the various interpretations of service learning that I encounter daily.

As I struggle to come to terms with my own theories of community service writing, other academics' theories and examples of "successful" programs, and a "feel good" approach to service learning that is becoming very popular in grant-funded programs, I find myself in uncharted territory. I realize that while most service-learning pedagogies hope to emphasize the ways in which community service connects students to the "real," and allows them the opportunity to connect their actions to their academic and civic lives, the reality is that many end up losing these final two components. Instead, the actual community service is highlighted and student reflection remains at a personal level. Cultural activism—such as that promoted by cultural studies pedagogies—is often missing in both the theories and pedagogies of service learning. The decision to ignore the action potential inherent in cultural studies and its potential contributions to service learning may very well subvert a potentially radical and critical pedagogy into merely a trend.

Cultural studies pedagogies compel students to look beyond the written page and recognize the "texts" of the everyday. I agree with Maśud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton in their claim that:

> the point of critical cultural studies is not simply to witness cultural events, but to intervene in them; that is to produce socially transformative cultural understandings. It does so by refusing to take experience...as a given.... In its efforts to produce social transformation..., critical cultural studies investigates the

> production and maintenance of subjectivities in relation to the ideologies of class, race, and gender—and the related ongoing struggles over access to power and economic resources. (79)

Cultural studies can provide students with the heuristics necessary to critically write about their individual experiences with community service. It enables them to reflect on, and critique, an "action text," rather than writing about how they have helped the less fortunate. We must provide students the tools and resources integral to an understanding of the cultural chaos (often disguised as stability) surrounding their experiences. For instance, if students are not provided with an understanding of the different levels of literacy, its power and privileges, and issues of access, prior to working in an after-school tutoring program, then they will not grasp the import of their own reactions—much less their actions—and their writing will reflect this. In my job I work with almost thirty service-learning after-school programs, and as I observe the service and the learning taking place, I am amazed at how often both remain relatively uncomplicated. In order to gain what Herzberg terms "critical consciousness," students need to understand that the services they perform are texts in action; they have historical, economic, social and cultural positions. If students' civic actions are not viewed as texts to be analyzed, they will merely be required acts of kindness.

This is not to say that I am unaware of the salient critiques of many cultural studies pedagogies. In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," Ellen Cushman critiques cultural studies-based pedagogies as being too text-based to ever produce real action. In a seminal and comprehensive overview of service learning in composition, Thomas Deans questions cultural studies' adherence to academic rhetoric in student writing. Consider Maxine Hairston's now somewhat famous—if not notorious—argument that: cultural studies "...puts

dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student" (180). Simply put, Hairston critiques cultural studies theories as a leftist, political, and radical means of persuading students to accept an instructor's personal political agenda.

However, cultural studies does not try to pass itself off as a neutral pedagogy (as if there were such a thing). Cultural studies *is* based on Marxism; it *does* require students to move outside of their comfort zones; and it *is* primarily concerned with power and politics. Power and politics are at the very core of any community service action—period. And critiques such as Hairston's are problematic because of the strength of their influence. Cultural studies has developed the reputation of advocating classrooms in which those "damn liberal" instructors tell their students how and what to think. One result has been a misunderstanding of cultural studies theories among non-profit agencies and university-based service learning centers. The fact that at our institution we have an Office of Community Service Learning that works specifically with faculty and local agencies is exciting and it affords wonderful opportunities for faculty, staff, and students. Problems arise, however, when we expect a center that is often grant driven, and in many cases run by a staff with very little teaching experience, to explain to faculty and their students the complexities of service learning. In order to exist they must make service learning "easy" for everyone involved. Service learning—in any discipline—is not easy. Service learning pedagogies that acknowledge the power and politics at play in community actions is downright hard. Unfortunately, these centers often become a place where students go to find an agency at which they can volunteer in order to fluff up their resumes.

Obviously the words "cultural studies" are not used at my place of work when referring to service-learning activities; but neither are the words "critique," "analyze," or "challenge."

When the non-profit world refers to curricula requirements for service learning, they ask that class time be used for "reflection." The reflection they advocate is almost always personal responses, observations, or narratives. Many are not aware of expressivist pedagogies, and I am not sure that they need to be. For I am not arguing that personal reflection is unproductive, only that it is inadequate as a sole means of student reflection. Unfortunately, service-learning advocates, many of whom have an enormous amount of influence, have shied away from the ideologies of, and even the phrase "cultural studies." In doing so, they have domesticated service learning to the point that many instructors believe that personal reflection is enough, and therefore they also get the opportunity to "feel good" due to their contribution—via syllabi—to the community.

It is interesting that while the language of numerous scholars promotes a combination of service learning and cultural studies (e.g. Freire, Berlin, Cushman, Herzberg, Deans), they themselves often insist on separating the two into Stephen North-like camps, overlooking the complimentary convergences. Indeed, both pedagogies promote a social-epistemic rhetoric. Due to a multitude of variations and interpretations, neither ideology can be defined; many would even prefer to separate them both from composition entirely. Cultural studies and service learning are both immersed in politics and power. They both suggest the classroom as a forum for investigating the theoretical, practical, and political aspects of the information students encounter. Both pedagogies seek to "produce" students who are civic-minded rhetors. Both claim to be epistemologically sound, yet both are critiqued for not promoting basic writing skills. And most importantly, both cultural studies and service learning embody the action potential necessary for social change.

The question that begs to be answered—when so many service-learning advocates (especially those in composition) are promoting the tenants of cultural studies—is why cultural studies and community service writing are not viewed more often as complementary rather than competing. In "Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition," Thomas Deans astutely recognizes that "successful combinations of paradigms are not those that haphazardly stir different approaches into a pedagogical melting pot, but rather those that weave a fabric of distinct yet related pedagogies to address distinct yet related literacy goals" (147). Unfortunately, compositionists' allusions to cultural studies frameworks are not always resoundingly clear to other professionals, and when critics do not discuss the political undercurrents involved with every aspect of community service and do not clearly establish the ways in which these politics need to be addressed in a classroom, political, economic, and ideological constructs of the community lose their importance. Politics and power cannot be separated from community service acts and they cannot be separated from student rhetoric. When this is not articulated, the idea of politics being an unsafe territory is reinforced.

It is easy to understand how the theories behind community service writing become diluted as non-profit organizations petition money from government and other benefactors. In order to receive money, an organization cannot offend the benefactor; in order to not offend, the organization must be neutral. Cultural studies is not neutral. Service learning, on the other hand, can be masked as neutral. The terms "politics" and "power" are usurped by buzzwords such as "democratic dialogue" and "civic-minded"—leaving professionals and students unsure of their academic and civic roles. I'd like to provide you with a very real example of how this domestication takes place.

In the program that I administer, political activism is prohibited. This affects my AmeriCorps*VISTA members at a personal and professional level. One of my strongest VISTAs, a young woman with a degree in Cultural Anthropology, was invited to go to Washington and lobby against Charles Pickering's appointment to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. I could not let her go. For her to do so, would have been against all federal guidelines and I would have been required to terminate her. It was irrelevant that she felt very strongly about the issues involved and believed she was doing a service to the very community she is serving.

Unfortunately, she is affected by such guidelines at the professional level as well. Not only can she not lobby, she cannot discuss politics with the college students, the children at the mission where she works, or with the children's parents. She cannot even take them to vote if they request her to do so. This affects every college class she works with to incorporate service learning. For instance, this means that when she supervises college students at a battered women's shelter, she cannot participate if they discuss pro-choice issues. She is like an AIDS educator in the schools who is prohibited from mentioning sex. She has accepted the fact that for her two year long term of service she must abide by these guidelines because she is proud of what she is doing in her community. However, her experiences are also an example of what can (or can't) happen when we attempt to cover up the political concerns of community service.

Henry Giroux's definition of a strong and effective pedagogy includes recognition of social politics that will lead to social action. He argues that:

> ...there is a dire need to develop pedagogical practices...that bring teachers, parents, and students together around new and more emancipatory visions of community. On the other hand, there is a need to recognize that all aspects of

> politics outside of the schools also represent a particular type of pedagogy, in which knowledge is always linked to power, social practices are always embodiments of concrete relations between diverse human beings and traditions, and all interaction contains implicit visions about the role of the citizen and the purpose of the community. (6)

This definition embodies what I perceive as the objectives of community service writing. Community service writing seeks to encourage a certain kind of writer: one that can reflect on his or her own experiences; someone who can think, read, and write critically; and someone who has experience doing these things in an environment other than the classroom. In order to produce such writers, we must acknowledge our intentions for our students as writers and as citizens, and we must acknowledge the ways in which politics and power—and yes, cultural studies—encompass acts of service. Until this happens, community service writing will not evolve; it will merely be a course that includes volunteerism.

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